

DEPARTMENT of the INTERIOR

FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

news release

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UNITED STATES MOVES TO PROTECT NEWLY DISCOVERED SEA TURTLE NESTING BEACH

The United States is moving to protect a recently discovered nesting area on St. Croix for the world's heaviest reptile, the leatherback sea turtle, by proposing critical habitat for this endangered species, Keith M. Schreiner, Associate Director of the Interior Department's U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, announced today.

The proposal, published in the March 23, 1978, Federal Register, identifies Sandy Point Beach in St. Croix of the U.S. Virgin Islands as critical habitat for the leatherback. Interested persons have until May 22, 1978, to comment on the proposal.

The leatherback sea turtle is a rare and critically endangered reptile found in scattered locations throughout the world. The sea turtles, which can reach 1,200 pounds and 5 feet, require sloping sandy beaches with at least a foot of dry sand above the moisture level in areas where deepwater is close to shore.

Much of the hope for the survival and recovery of this species depends upon the maintenance of suitable and undisturbed nesting beaches. Such beaches would qualify for recognition as critical habitat under Section 7 of the Endangered Species Act of 1973. That Act states that no Federal agency can authorize, fund, or carry out any action that could adversely affect critical habitat of an endangered species.

During the summer of 1977, the Fish and Wildlife Service became aware of a newly discovered nesting site of leatherbacks on the western end of St. Croix. Various government agencies, including the Service, conducted observations and found almost 80 leatherback nests in addition to evidence of egg poaching and potential development. Nesting activity was seen to occur on the .8 mile long by .1 mile wide strip of Sandy Point Beach. This small area constitutes the only known beach in lands under U.S. jurisdiction that is used extensively for nesting by the endangered leatherbacks.

Anyone wishing to comment on the proposal should address them to the Director (OES), U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, U.S. Department of the Interior, Washington, D.C. 20240.

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